

YES, CATS GRIEVE.

HOW TO HELP THEM THROUGH IT

BY SANDRA MURPHY

"When I was a child, we had a cat named Minka. Every day, five minutes before my father came home, she would go sit on the gatepost and wait for him so he could carry her inside. It was their ritual. He didn't have regular hours, but we'd all know he was almost home." Vera Clay remembered. "My father died in April 1966. After he died, Minka sat on the gatepost all the time. She only came in for meals. At night we brought her inside but after breakfast, she would be back on that gatepost."

Vera continued, "Our house, along with almost a thousand others in Hobart, burned in the bush fires on February 7, 1967. Every house on our street was lost. Weird, but the gatepost survived the fire, although the rest of the fence burned. I had not remembered any of that. I just remember the tears whenever I looked at Minka, waiting for my father to come home and carry her into the house again."

It's hard for cats like Minka, when their person has died at the hospital. There is no closure. Put an unwashed shirt or used blanket in the cat's bed. It can be a comfort because the scent of their person remains behind. And as Minka looked for structure to her days by waiting on the gatepost, keep a regular schedule with your cat to let him know there are routines he can rely on—food and bedtime at the same time, work schedule the same, and if he's in the mood, playtime.

Reilly, a rescue tabby, grieved for weeks for his dog, Avery. They had been together for over fifteen years. He slept with her, encouraged her to eat, and as her health failed, helped her up in the morning, let her lean on him until she got her balance. When she died at the emergency veterinary hospital, he was unable to say goodbye. Without Avery, Reilly had no job, no place to sleep and no one to care for. He prowled the house, crying and lost. Jean said, "It broke my heart to see him. I gave him a catnip toy and he carried that with him. If I said get Baby, he'd go find his toy. At night, I'd hold and rock him and talk about Avery until we fell asleep. It seemed to help him, to hear her name. It helped me too, to talk about her." Reilly sleeps on the bed now but Jean said, "If I turn over, he moves too. He has to be able to see my face." The bedtime ritual and his new toy gave Reilly a new focus.

Scooter keeps her eye on Mary Parker. "When I was deployed to Kuwait last summer, Scooter hid under the bed and didn't interact with the rest of the



family, not even the two other cats. When I came home in March, she came out from under the bed, didn't know me at first, and hid again. I called her as I left the room and she must have recognized my voice. She meowed and came into the hallway to find me," Mary said. "Scooter's forgiven me for going away. I swear she wants me to go to bed early just so she can curl up next to me."

Voice recognition can have its drawbacks. Dusty Rainboldt's cat Groucho had grieved for six months for his buddy Winkie who died suddenly. When Groucho heard Winkie's meow on a video, Dusty said, "It was sad to see. He started to miss Winkie all over again."

Cats understand more words than we give them credit for. When Pepe Francois died at five years old, Jean Pierre searched for Francois in every hiding place, nap spot or rest area they'd shared. His person, Christine Michaels, spent extra time with Jean Pierre so he'd know he wasn't alone. "At the same time, whenever Jean Pierre searched for Pepe, I'd say no more Pepe Francois, bye-bye Francois. My cats know the words no more and bye-bye. Over time, it seemed to help," she said. Extra attention reassures a grieving cat.

Jessica Setnick's cat Leonardo grief for Michaelangelo took another form. He didn't search or cry. Leonardo became depressed and licked his fur until he got bald patches. His veterinarian confirmed there was no physical cause.

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YES, CATS GRIEVE CONTINUED

Jessica said, "Nothing helped until Brenda came along. At first they were unsure of each other but now they are best friends." A major stress in your cat's life can cause changes in his immune system. A checkup with your veterinarian will rule out any physical problems worsened or brought on by his grief.

It's not just cats who are family members who grieve for one another. Lynn Thompson told, "When my first cat died, we buried him in the back yard next to the bird bath where he loved to sit. A feline friend of his from down the street came for several days afterward and lay on his grave."

Dot was the tame kitten of a feral cat. She first lived outdoors with Mama Cat and a half-sister, and then moved into the house with two older male cats. She was restless when one of the cats died but coped. When the second cat passed away, Dot was an only cat for the first time in her life. Not only did she prowl the house, she yowled. Her person, Janet Perry said, "If my husband and I left, she would cry the entire time we were gone. When we came home she'd meow for us, loud enough so we could hear her while we were still in the driveway. Ultimately we got two more cats. Dot was resentful at first, but after almost a year, she got used to them. Even before she liked them, she stopped the lonesome behavior which had gone on for more than six months."

Marilyn Krieger, a certified cat behavior consultant, advises waiting like the Perry's did, before getting another cat. "Bringing a cat into the house is stressful. You and your cat need to work through the grief, not be distracted from it. How long will that take? It varies from cat to cat, person to person."

George is the strong silent type of cat. His mother, Mathilda, was the one who met their people, Carol and Jim Egan, at the door and meowed all the news. She was the one who got first pick of where to sleep on the bed. "George was always special—first kitten to reach all the developmental milestones, always very in-tune with us, yet always the second cat while Matilda was around," said Carol. "After Mathilda passed away, we noticed a change in George. He greeted us at the door with loud meows, very talkative. He began to sleep on my hip, just like Matilda did. Never in twelve years had he done that. He senses he's alone and must take care of us all by himself. Cats are so much more intuitive and emotional than they're given credit for."



Some cats seem to feel both love and grief to a deeper extent than others. Or maybe they're just more willing to show their feelings. Webster is a cat like that. The world as Webster knew it was turned upside down. His regular places to climb and hide were gone, meal times changed, and he was in the shelter instead of his home.

His person of ten years had passed away and Webster found himself at Tabby's Place, a cat sanctuary. The volunteers at Tabby's had seen grief before, sometimes the break-your-heart kind, but Webster went to another level. He exhibited the classic signs of denial and anger.

He screamed and threw himself full force against the bars of his cage. If a volunteer tried to comfort him, he would kick his food bowl and try to bite or scratch. Still, the staff persisted. Instead of a quarantine cage, Webster was moved to the bedroom in the sanctuary apartment. The improvement was immediate. Angela Townsend of Tabby's Place said, "Weeping may last for the night, but joy does come in the morning, and the dawn is breaking in Websterville."

His final transformation came about through another cat—a calico girl named Cali. Cali is a people cat. Other cats are okay but not necessary in her world so her closeness to Webster is quite a surprise to all who witness it.

"One of the great privileges of loving cats is to see the bonds they build, one to another. As unexpected as it is beautiful, Cali and Webster's bond is one-of-a-kind-wonderful," says Angela. "It's another reminder that whatever we have endured, we can heal as we carry each other and love our way through. That reminder may be Cali and Webster's greatest gift of all."

CLASSIC SIGNS OF GRIEF—IN HUMANS OR ANIMALS:

Denial, anger, bargaining (why me?), depression and acceptance.

MARILYN KRIEGER'S PRIORITY LIST FOR GRIEVING CATS AND THEIR PEOPLE:

- Make sure your cat eats, drinks and uses the litter box. Just a few days without food and water can be life-threatening to a cat.
- Keep to a schedule. Be reliable. Give him what he wants most, whether it is a favorite treat, lap time during TV or grooming.
- Let him climb or hide if he needs time alone. Put a favorite treat in his hiding places. It will become more of a treasure hunt than a hideaway when done on a regular basis.
- Leave something of yours on his bed so he knows you'll be back—an old t-shirt or a towel is good.
- Don't get another cat too soon. You, and your cat, need to work through the grief, not be distracted from it.
- Remember, cats pick up on your emotions.

RESOURCES

www.tabbysplace.org A cage free sanctuary for cats rescued from a hopeless situation.

Marilyn Krieger www.thecatcoach.com Author: Cat Fancy's Naughty No More! Change Unwanted Behaviors Through Positive Reinforcement



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